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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 000465

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DEPT FOR EUR/RUS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/02/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: PUBLIC CHAMBER ANNIVERSARY: THE JURY'S STILL OUT

Classified By: POL M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (b,d).

Summary

¶1. (C) January marks the one-year anniversary of the Public Chamber, a body created at the initiative of President Putin in order to provide a channel for communication with the public and, in part it is believed, to compensate for the Kremlin's decision to appoint, instead of elect, governors and tighten control over civil society in the wake of the Beslan hostage crisis. Conversations over the last several weeks suggest that observers of the Chamber's activities fall into two groups: those who believe that the body has met the modest goals set for it, and those who describe it as a disappointment. Those who think that the Chamber has been marginally successful admit that it has done little to address systemic problems during its first year in office. The Chamber has been more effective, they believe, when it has added its weight to already festering issues, and they point to its interventions on behalf of the residents of Butovo and its efforts to highlight the brutal hazing of military recruit Sychoy as evidence. With the Chamber's budget reportedly expected to treble in 2007, and talk among some Chamber members of having their two year appointments extended, the body seems on the way to either greater professionalization, or to becoming a sinecure for those who were allegedly chosen for their loyalty to the Kremlin. End summary.

The Chamber's Composition and Mandate

¶2. (U) The Public Chamber was inaugurated on December 22, 2005, but actually began work in January 2006. As mandated by law, its initial 42 members were selected by the President and they, in consultation with Russian social organizations chose a further 42 members, who in turn identified additional candidates from the seven Federal districts for a total of 127 members. The Public Chamber features 17 commissions and numerous sub-commissions and working groups. It is mandated to aid the development of a consensus on "socially significant interests of citizens of Russia," in order to "find solutions to the most important problems of economic and social development." Defense of human rights is an explicit part of the Chamber's mandate.

Symptom of a Dysfunctional Duma

¶3. (C) Many believe that the Chamber was confected in order to compensate for the tough line taken by the Kremlin in the wake of the Beslan hostage crisis. Others see in the

creation of the Chamber an effort by an increasingly isolated Presidential Administration to bridge the gap between the government and its public. Still others find in the Chamber more than a faint echo of the Soviet proclivity to create structures and manage through them even those activities that arguably should be beyond government control. In an early January conversation, the Moscow Carnegie Center's Nikolay Petrov described the Chamber to us as a product of the government's reflexive creation of structures intended to fill the vacuum created when its centralizing efforts make existing institutions unresponsive to the public. Petrov believed the evolution of a "rubber stamp" State Duma, dominated by one, Kremlin-controlled party, left it unable to meaningfully reflect the will of the body politic. The Presidential Administration therefore invented the Chamber as a compensatory channel for public feedback, but the selection only of "people with whom the Kremlin likes to talk" has made it as ineffective as the Duma, he said.

Members' Critique

14. (C) In other conversations, Chamber members ascribed the body's limited effectiveness to a variety of structural factors:

-- Sergey Ryakhovskiy blamed the potluck nature of the Chamber's membership. Chamber members, he said, lack common values and have little sense of common purpose;

-- Ryakhovskiy fingered as well the Chamber's inability to require the appearance of GOR officials or Duma deputies at its working group or commission meetings. Too often, the

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Chamber had to rely on personal connections or good will to get the answers it needed;

-- Vyacheslav Glazyshev thought the lack of professional staff had hindered the Chamber's work. He hoped that the larger budget forecast for 2007 would allow that deficit to be at least in part corrected;

-- The Chamber's Andrey Przhezhdomskiy admitted to us that his initial skepticism about the Chamber has not abated. Its members are too often "cut off from society" and it has no ability to mandate change. It can only highlight problems. Also hindering the Chamber, Przhezhdomskiy thought, was the weakness of the Russian NGO community, on which the Chamber relies. "There are too many virtual NGOs," he complained, who lack the necessary expertise.

HR Activists Offer
Conditional Thumbs Up

15. (C) Independent human rights activists offered a tepid endorsement of the Chamber, conceding that it at least had not been a Kremlin puppet, as some had expected. The World Wildlife Fund's Igor Chestin, who is also a Chamber member, thought that Chamber recommendations, even if ignored, at least make the government aware of alternative solutions to problems. "For Human Rights" Director Lev Ponomarev praised the Chamber's success in bringing the Syrov case to the attention of the public, while the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights has endorsed its recommendations for fighting extremism and suggested that the Chamber's recommendations should be mandatory for the Duma.

16. (C) The conditional endorsement of the Chamber by some in the human rights community has not been reciprocated. The lion's share of the USD 9.4 million in grants awarded by the Chamber has gone to organizations, say critics, close to Chamber members. Memorial and "For Civil Rights" were

apparently the lone human rights organizations unaffiliated with a Chamber member to be recipients of Chamber largesse.

Gathering Popularity with
the Public

¶7. (SBU) In a December 2006 VTsYuM poll, the public offered only faint praise for the work of the Chamber. Forty-two percent of those asked could not say what the Chamber does, while only 31 percent of the remainder agreed that the Chamber has done good work. Chamber supporters point out that the Chamber is, nevertheless, more popular than both the Federation Council and the State Duma.

¶8. (U) The nine thousand appeals made to the Chamber in its first year of existence can also be interpreted as a tacit endorsement of its work. Eighty percent of that number concern the behavior of law enforcement agencies. That may be in part due to the high profile of the head of the Chamber's Commission for Control over Law Enforcement, Anatoliy Kucherenko. Przhizhdomskiy and Ryakhovskiy agreed that Kucherenko's appearance at the side of families about to be illegally evicted from their homes in the southern Moscow suburb of Butovo last summer and his sure media sense had raised the Chamber's profile.

Chamber's Modest Accomplishments

¶9. (C) On the positive side of the ledger are the Chamber's concrete accomplishments, and the promise some believe it holds for the future. The faint praise that some observers --and members-- offer for the Chamber is the product of the "half-a-loaf-is-better-than-none" calculus currently applied to many developments in Russia. Cited among the Chamber's achievements in its first year are:

-- the proposal to create public councils for each of the GOR ministries (one has already been formed for the Ministry of Defense);

-- its success, through working in the regions, in drawing the Ministry of Health's attention to problems in reform contemplated through the National Projects;

-- a decision, lobbied by the Chamber, to move casinos outside city limits;

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-- Putin's eleventh-hour decision to relocate an oil pipeline further from the shores of Lake Baikal;

-- reversal of the conviction of a driver convicted in an automobile accident that killed Altay Governor Yevdokimov;

-- opposing a bill that would have limited protests. The Chamber termed the legislation an "attack on citizens' rights";

-- recommendations for amending 18 bills submitted to the Duma in 2006. (Critics contended that the Duma largely ignored the Chamber's suggestions, and Chamber Secretary Yevgeniy Velikhov conceded in a recent interview that business lobbyists are more effective in shaping legislation.)

-- encouraging the formation of public chambers at the regional level;

-- adding its voice to the international outcry over the draconian NGO law.

Comment

¶10. (C) In those cases --casinos, the NGO law, public councils for ministries, Butovo, Sychov-- where a better than expected outcome has been achieved, the Chamber has in fact been a secondary factor, adding its voice either to that of an outraged public or to an already wavering government. Valeriy Fadeyev, a member who, according to Glazychev, godfathered the Chamber, told us recently that the Chamber was at best a "cheerleader," unable to effect change on its own. Still, he said, cheerleaders are important. The Chamber provides legitimacy and weight to the efforts of those attempting to right an obvious wrong or soften the impact of a new measure contemplated by the government. Fadeyev likened the role of the Chamber to that of Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin who, Fadeyev thought, must carefully select both the issue and the time to raise it if he is to be successful. Ryakhovskiy hoped that uncertainty in the face of looming Duma elections might provide the Chamber with more opportunities to be effective, although he acknowledged that room for maneuver could just as easily shrink as the prospect of change at the top of government creates further rigidity below.
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